

Enlist in the WAVES

Throughout World War II, women contributed to the war effort in various fields, including enlisting in the U.S. Navy. Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), a unit of the U.S. Naval Reserve, was where those enlistees went. It was established on July 21, 1942 by Congress, and President Roosevelt, realizing that servicewomen would be a wartime plus, signed it into law on July 30, 1942. This

authorized the U.S. Navy to accept women into the Naval Reserve as commissioned officers and at the enlisted level, effective for the duration of the war plus six months.

The purpose of the WAVES was to release officers and men for sea duty and replace them with women in shore establishments. Most enlisted WAVES worked in jobs traditionally performed by women, such as clerical work, health care, or storekeeping. They also took over jobs typically held by men, in occupations like aviation machinists, aviation metalsmiths, parachute riggers, control tower operators, radio operators, yeomen, or statisticians. The officers were placed in positions as doctors, attorneys, engineers, mathematicians, and chaplains. One WAVE mathematician, Grace Hopper, was assigned to Harvard University to work on the computation project with the Mark I computer.

Mildred McAfee, president of Wellesley College, was sworn in as a naval reserve lieutenant commander, the first female commissioned officer of the U.S. Navy and the first director of the WAVES.



The intensive 12-week training course entailed eight-hour days of classroom study. The women, equivalent to yeomen, were trained to perform secretarial and clerical functions, before going into specific schools.



The first class consisted of 644 women, and subsequent classes produced a maximum of 1,250 graduates. The results exceeded expectations; by fall 1942, the U.S. Navy had produced a record 10,000 women for active service. The WAVES were primarily white, but 72 African-American women eventually served in the ranks.



Requirements To be in the WAVES
25 to 49 years old
20/20 vision
Normal auditory acuity
Speaking ability
Quick reactions in stressful situations
Possess a high school or a business diploma, or have equivalent experience

The WAVES' uniforms were designed by the New York fashion house of Mainbocher after their services were secured (without cost) through the efforts of Josephine Forrester. She was a former fashion editor at Vogue and the wife of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, James Forrester.